

# How Historic Infrastructure Investments Can Advance Equity in the Labor Force

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The historic infrastructure investments of the Biden-Harris administration create a unique opportunity to ensure equity, inclusion and access to good jobs for all. But how do we ensure that every person, regardless of gender, race and other factors, can benefit from these unprecedented investments? How do we expand access to quality job training, apprenticeships and ultimately, lucrative and rewarding jobs and careers?

This week is National Apprenticeship Week (NAW), a nationwide celebration to showcase the value of Registered Apprenticeship in re-building our economy, advancing racial and gender equity, building a pipeline to quality jobs and supporting underserved communities. This year's NAW theme is "Registered Apprenticeship: Superhighway to Good Jobs," to reflect the fact that Registered Apprenticeship is a proven and industry-driven training model that provides a pathway into good jobs and can improve diversity, equity, inclusion and accessibility (DEIA) in the workplace.

Despite making up nearly 50% of the workforce, women still make up only 4% of the construction building trades workforce and less than one-third of the manufacturing workforce. Part of the problem is the pipeline: Women make up only about 14% of active apprentices and about 4.5% of apprentices in the construction trades.



The Department of Labor's Women's Bureau is working to dismantle the numerous barriers women face when it comes to accessing "nontraditional" jobs in infrastructure-related fields like construction, manufacturing and clean energy. These efforts are one way we're tackling occupational segregation – the concentration of women in jobs that pay lower wages – and the gender wage gap.

In September 2023 we released *Tools for Building an Equitable Infrastructure Workforce: Gender Equity Strategies a Model*, which provides information on the barriers women face in accessing male-dominated infrastructure careers, along with strategies and resources for overcoming them. It also provides examples of successful programs and policies from across the United States, highlighting ways that groups are working to tackle these issues in their own areas.

The toolkit is structured around three overarching themes:

1. make the intentional choice to build a diverse workforce;
2. do targeted recruitment and address barriers to entry; and
3. retain a diverse workforce.

In other words: **Want women, get women and keep women.** The best practices include:

- Building strong local/regional partnerships between a diverse set of stakeholders, including government agencies, employers, unions, workforce development entities, philanthropic organizations, women-focused pre-apprenticeship programs, tradeswomen organizations and tradeswomen themselves.
- Creating a data-driven and intentional equity and diversity plan, including setting goals for recruiting and hiring women and committing to regular and consistent monitoring and reporting on progress.
- Doing targeted outreach and recruitment using inclusive images and language.
- Providing comprehensive, wraparound supportive services for those who experience the most barriers, including providing tools and equipment, transportation, housing, and child and long-term care for dependents, especially during nonstandard hours.
- Ensuring women have access to female mentors and role models and, for unions, women's committees.
- Implementing policies and programs to change workplace culture, prevent gender-based violence and harassment, and address health and safety concerns.

The toolkit serves as a resource for states and territories as they develop Broadband Equity, Access, and Deployment (BEAD) workforce plans, providing proven strategies to bolster the telecommunications industry's pipeline of skilled, diverse workers. It can and should be used by a wide range of stakeholders and works best when the strategies are implemented by a broad coalition that shares the goal of advancing equitable pathways for attracting, hiring and retaining women.

Countless industries have moved closer to gender equity over the past several decades, and I know construction and infrastructure can get there, too. We have the tools. At the Women's Bureau, we challenge everyone involved – project owners, contractors, unions, state and local governments and workers – to use them to make these fields safe, respectful and inclusive for all.

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**Tags:** working women, apprenticeship, National Apprenticeship Week, Women's Bureau, Employment and Training Administration, Equity, gender equality

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